

## Article

# The Complex Web of Othernesses in Marcus Gardley's Play *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry*

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**Abstract:** Marcus Gardley's play *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* (2013) traces the development of a Black Seminole community in the Indian Territory from 1850 to 1866, with occasional flashbacks to the days of the Seminoles' removal from Florida. Rather than positing a unified ethnicity, the action reveals a complex web of Othernesses, including characters identified as "black", others as "full-blood Seminole", and still others as "black and Seminole". Given the lack of ethnic unity, the new community constructs an identity in its distinction from and enmity with the neighboring Creeks, pointing to an underlying irony since the Creeks actually represent a main component in the ethnogenesis of the Seminoles in the 18th century. By calling attention to this simulacrum of Otherness, the play questions identity formation based on difference from an Other. Finally, Christian and pagan beliefs and customs live side by side in the community and compete for dominance over it. The multiple frictions caused by inner-group disputes, external conflicts with a constructed Other and religious discord lead to outbursts of violence that threaten to tear the community apart. Only a re-integration of its component parts can save it.

**Keywords:** Black Seminoles; collective identity; web of Othernesses

## 1. Introduction

Marcus Gardley's *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* (published and premiered in 2013) is a war play of sorts: Without representing acts of war on stage, the effects of wars permeate the play's plot. At the heart of the play lies a Black Seminole community that has been displaced as a consequence of war and which struggles for a re-configuration of its collective identity in its new home. As this article's analysis intends to show, the play reveals how for this community such a re-configuration is both complex and problematic, employing exclusionary Othering techniques while having to negotiate a fundamental internal heterogeneity. This heterogeneous identity does not only involve the community's ethnic hybridity (African-American and Seminole) and its creolized language, which mixes English with Mvkoke, but also two belief systems—Christianity and Native American paganism—which, though at times fusing with each other, more frequently compete with one another. As this interpretation aims to show, these questions related to a heterogeneous identity and a struggle over how to define its terms are central to the play's dramatic conflict.

But before delving more deeply into these issues, the following section will situate the play in the context of how war has been portrayed in recent years in English-speaking drama and theatre.

## 2. The Recent Development of War Plays

In the late postmodern period, more specifically at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, English-language plays on war were frequently set either in unspecified places, emphasizing the global ubiquity that war had come to develop, or in more or less recognizable locations in the audience's own country, transferring presumably far-away conflicts to the spectators'

very home environment [1]. Examples of the former are Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), and Zinnie Harris's trilogy *Solstice* (2005), *Midwinter* (2004), and *Fall* (2008). Instances of the latter are Sam Shepard's *States of Shock* (1992), Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), and Debbie Tucker Green's *Stoning Mary* (2005). Most of these plays are characterized by their blunt and explicit portrayal of violence and destruction, bringing the cruelty and dehumanization of wars fought elsewhere home to a Western-European or North-American audience, trying to shake them out of their comfort and bring them "into a position alike to that of the victims of war" [1] (p. 24). Another option of portraying war on stage in that period was by establishing parallels between current events and antiquity, creating intertextual links to well-known Greek classics that form part of the theatregoers' cultural background, thereby positing war as a universal constant accompanying humankind throughout history while at the same time, through catharsis, "inviting the audience to identify and empathize with the victims [...]" [1] (p. 119). Examples are Peter Sellars and Robert Auletta's adaptation of Aeschylus' *The Persians* (1993), Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), Katheryn Blume and Sharron Bower's *Lysistrata Project* (2003), and the University Theatre at Western Michigan University's production *Women of Troy: Women of War* (2004).

More recently, there seems to have been a change of tendency, a return to the historically concrete and geographically localized, leaving behind both the unspecified immediacy and the universalizing intertextuality of the plays of the turn of the century. Important instances of this new tendency are Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2008), David Graig's *Dunsinane* (2010), Suzan Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2015), and Quiara Alegria Hudes' trilogy *Eliot, a Soldier's Fugue* (2006), *Water by the Spoonful* (2011), and *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (2013). These plays clearly identify the time and place of the armed conflict they are concerned with although some of them (notably those by Nottage and Hudes), rather than portraying warfare itself, focus on its repercussions on people's lives—both at the very place of conflict and at other locations, thus, combining the local impacts of war with its more global ramifications, making these plays adapt a glocal perspective that is considered to be characteristic of transmodernism [2] (p. 34).

Marcus Gardley's *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* belongs to this latter group. Chronologically speaking, it is the second part of Gardley's Seminole Trilogy, which deals with a Black Seminole community, following it from its days in Florida to its emigration to Oklahoma and its further development there in the second half of the 19th century (*The Road Weeps* is actually the first of the three plays to have been written although, in the historical sequence of events the trilogy portrays, it occupies the second position; the first part, *The Rocks Are Going to Cry Out*, has had a staged reading but remains unpublished and unproduced while the third installment of the trilogy is as yet unfinished [3]).

As already indicated in the introduction above, in *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* actual acts of war are represented only very sporadically. However, the whole play is framed and structured by war or, rather, wars: The action starts after the Second Seminole War (1835–1842), and the two acts that make up the play are separated by a sixteen-year period, during which a local skirmish with the Creeks (1850) as well as the American Civil War (1861–1865) take place, both of which are skipped over by the action on stage—only the causes of the former and some of the consequences of both are depicted. What the play centers on, thus, is how all these different wars affect the community.

### 3. Historical Background

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Spanish-ruled region of East Florida (whose geographical extension more or less coincides with the present-day state of Florida) had become a major concern for the southern states and territories of the U.S.A. An important number of African-American slaves had escaped there and were given refuge by the local American Indian community, the Seminoles [4] (pp. 7–16). Although frequently the Seminoles, themselves, would enslave the refugees, the treatment these received from the Seminoles was much less harsh than what they had experienced in the U.S.A.—it was closer to medieval bonded labor than to the slavery

system in the Southern states: The refugees had to hand over a certain amount of their crop [5] (p. 5) but, otherwise, retained much of their autonomy and independence [4] (p. 86). In addition to that, some of them intermarried with the Seminoles, and some of their male children were accepted as members of the Seminole community, especially if their father was Seminole [4] (p. 32). All in all, black people's fate in Florida seemed to be much lighter than in the Southern states of the U.S. Florida, thus, represented a lure for many slaves, which aroused the anger of the Southern states. As a consequence, the U.S.A. led many violent military incursions into Florida, harassing both the Seminoles and the Spanish, eventually leading to the First Seminole War in 1818 and the sale of Florida to the U.S.A. the following year [6] (p. 129). In the ensuing years, the practice of settler colonialism created more and more friction between the white settlers and the Seminoles, who were encouraged to emigrate to Oklahoma but refused to do so [5] (p. 31–35). The growing tension led to the above-mentioned Second Seminole War (1835–1842), after which the Seminoles were forcefully removed to the Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma [4] (p. 50–51), where Black Seminoles built their own towns, one of them being Wewoka, founded in 1849 [4] (p. 75), which nowadays serves as the capital of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma.

#### 4. The Play

The main action of *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* covers the period from 1850 to 1866, that is, from shortly after Wewoka's foundation to just after the Civil War—although there are several flashbacks to the community's past in Florida and to its arrival in the Indian Territory.

The enforced migration is mythically reinterpreted by most of the characters as a journey into freedom. Throughout the play, parallels are established with the Hebrews in Egypt—implying the Black Seminoles' self-perception to be that of God's chosen people, Oklahoma becoming the "Promise Land" [7] (p. 187). In this, the Black Seminoles' migration parallels that of the American hegemonic society's move West, i.e., the pursuit of at least part of the American Dream. Like the Mayflower pilgrims, the Black Seminoles travel to a supposedly uninhabited piece of land to establish a utopian community. Only a retrospective speech by Horse Power (the community's elder) exposes the actual hardship, the "rocks that chewed through our deerskin shoes/Through our meat and bone [...] Drowning in the heat and burn of the desert stretch and sun/Walking 'pon our dead" [7] (p. 140), all of which turned this Western move into a trail of tears for the Black Seminoles as much as for all the other American Indian tribes that were forcefully removed from their home grounds.

Due to their migration, the group is deprived of one anchor for group identity: place. Therefore, in the re-configuration of their identity this community has to reinforce other aspects of group identity, such as ethnicity, beliefs, customs, narratives, and language. But the play clearly complicates the issue of identity. In a typical move of identity formation, the community uses Othering techniques (in the sense of a projection of an essential difference onto a group on account of its members' gender, ethnicity, etc., so as to simultaneously assert one's own group's homogeneity, normalcy, and superiority [8]), to construct an identity in its distinction from and enmity with the neighboring Creeks, whose fierceness and cruelty are insinuated by various characters throughout the play. Ironically, the Creeks actually represent a main component in the ethnogenesis of the Seminoles in the 18th century [4] (p. 5). The difference is, thus, not so clear-cut; in fact, according to Jack M. Schultz, "the distinction between the two groups was not formally recognized until after the Creek War of 1813–1814" [9] (p. 19). To uphold and even reinforce this simulated difference, the community even builds a wall between itself and the Creek territory, thereby creating what Homi Bhabha calls a "totalizing boundary" [10] (p. 149), which turns into difference what is actually similar. By calling attention to such a simulacrum, the play questions identity formation based on difference from an Other.

Nor is the group's identity in itself really uniform: Mainly representing a hybrid community created through the intermarriage between Seminoles and African-Americans (discussed in Section 3 above), most of its characters are identified by the play's *dramatis personae* as "black and Seminole" [7] (p. 136). However, the *dramatis personae* also identifies some of the community's members

as “black”, still others as “full-blood Seminole”, thereby breaking with a supposedly unified even though hybrid ethnicity. These features are also explicitly pointed out in the dialogue. In the course of the action, thus, a complex web of Othernesses is revealed. The abovementioned wall, thus, also projects the simulacrum of homogeneity on what is profoundly heterogeneous. Importantly, the community’s Othernesses are revealed to be hierarchized.

From the beginning, the Seminole community replicates the white settlers’ pattern of the first person to put his/her stake into the ground claiming ownership of the land. When they reach what is going to be their new home grounds, the full-blood Seminole Trowbridge and the African-American called Number Two race to see who can claim the land. As the end of the play reveals, Number Two wins, but since there are no witnesses, Trowbridge denies this—and, as he is the full-blood Seminole, claiming as such a supposed ethnic purity for himself and, thus, adopting a dominant position, the community believes him, and he becomes the owner of the land while his African-American competitor, representing yet another allegedly pure ethnicity, albeit one that is clearly treated as inferior by the community, is relegated to the periphery of the new settlement.

The “pure” Seminole, thus, becomes the new community’s leader, and lets everybody feel it, taking up the job as the town’s sheriff and ordering everyone around. As one of the character says about Trowbridge: “He ain’t a man, he a massuh” [7] (174). In one of the characters’ dreams, Trowbridge is even associated with a Pharaoh. In their exodus from Florida to Oklahoma, explicitly compared to the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt, the Black Seminoles have taken the Pharaoh along with them. In a similar vein, Philipp Reisner interprets the rivalry between the “pure” Seminole and the others in terms of “Old Testament tribal struggles and questions of tribal adherence and belonging” [11] (p. 194).

The new community ends up replicating the hierarchies of the American community that displaced them, the pure Seminole taking the lead, the black man being pushed to the margins of society. In this way, the play moves away from easy, accusatory binaries: Mainstream U.S.A.’s Other (or rather, one of the country’s several Others, i.e., the American Indian) becomes a new self, Othering others in turn.

Strikingly enough, intermarriage is still looked down upon—even though the very fact of intermarriage lies at the origins of this hybrid community. Without it, there would not be a Black Seminole society. Even so, Mary South, actually a full-blood Seminole and, thus, potentially at the top of the group’s hierarchy, is not fully accepted by the townspeople because she is married to the African-American Number Two. In a similar vein, Half George, a Black Seminole, is ostracized because she is married to a full-blood Seminole, Trowbridge—although Trowbridge himself is the town’s respected leader, or, rather, one of the town’s leaders, as I will argue below. Thus, the community has created its own, actually paradoxical, bigotry that parallels that of the U.S. mainstream society.

The vast majority of the action takes place in Wewoka—although in the play this place is highly stylized, represented only by a chapel, a trading post, and a well. Interestingly, the only time the place’s name is mentioned, instead of using its real Mvkoke name (Mvkoke being the language of the Seminoles), one character uses its English translation “barking water”, thereby evoking a potentially mythical dimension.

In this stylized set, the well acquires a central position: It is the meeting place of the townspeople. Its water is symbolic of the spirit of community. It is, therefore, no wonder that, when Goodbird, the full-blood Seminole sheriff’s son, is murdered by Number Two, the well runs dry. This murder functions as an original sin that seems to create a rift in the community. Suddenly, there is trouble in paradise. The killing is also a first culmination of the confrontation between Number Two and Trowbridge, an antagonism that sets the drama in motion and hovers over the play’s first act. However, the play’s complexities cannot be reduced to a merely personal confrontation of two antagonists. The conflict at the heart of the play runs much deeper than that. Thus, Goodbird’s murder eventually makes various kinds of tension, hidden until that moment, rise to the surface.

As already insinuated above, although Trowbridge, the Seminole landowner and sheriff is in an undoubted position of power, his leadership is contested—on the one hand, by Horse Power,

the town's elder, who at one point claims "I'm the one they'll always follow . . . this is my town" [7] (170), and, on the other hand, Fat. Rev. the head of the town's Christian church (although it later turns out that it is really Fat. Rev.'s wife M. Gene, a religious fanatic, who tries to exert her spiritual leadership through her husband).

In the community's expressions of Christian belief, there is a clear pagan substrate. When M. Gene moves rhythmically to her Christian pronouncements, and Horse Power performs his pagan spiritual dance, the stage directions point out how similar both dances are. Furthermore, the name the community uses to refer to Jesus Christ in the Mvko language—"Hesaketv emese"—literally means "breath master" [9] (p. 60), insinuating a pagan, rather than Christian, context. Christian and pagan practices have mixed with and even become similar to each other. The two religions, Christianity and paganism, have, thus, started to become creolized—but only to a certain extent because the reverend and M. Gene, on the one hand, and Horse Power, on the other, represent seemingly irreconcilable positions that oppose the two religions to each other, turning a blind eye to the characters' shared cultural hybridity. There is a constant struggle, growing in intensity as the play progresses, between the representatives of these two positions over whose narrative provides the official version of the community's belief system.

The reverend and, especially, his wife want to impose Christianity as the new law while Horse Power insists on adhering to their autochthonous pagan beliefs: "I tell the tales in this town! Me. I keep the stories. You cursed our town by telling folks dem biblical lies" [7] (p. 169). The town is, thus, torn between the old and the new faith. Although the chapel, as the stage instructions describing the set prove, occupies an important place in the community, when M. Gene interprets Goodbird's death and the dryness of the well in terms of Egyptian plagues, she obtains a violent reaction from the townspeople.

One central issue that the confrontation between M. Gene's and Horse Power's respective beliefs revolves around is each faith's relation to nature (in an interview Gardley, himself, has stressed that "nature [...] is a huge theme in the play" [12]). The animistic religion defended by Horse Power is in consonance with nature whereas the elder accuses the Christian religion not only to be set apart from nature but to actually create fear of it in the believers. Horse Power's goal is to bring the community back to living in unison with the environment. In contrast, the Christian goal, as represented in the play by Fat Rev. and M. Gene, is to read signs of catastrophe and condemnation into nature (due to the fallen nature of humankind). This leads to a hostile relationship with nature and, ultimately, according to Horse Power, to a loss of "the spirit's protection" [7] (p. 169).

The two full-blood Seminole characters in the play provide a kind of pragmatical middle ground. Thus, Mary South contrasts M. Gene's old-testamentarian interpretation of natural events as signs of coming plagues with her own assessment of the situation: "I've seen plagues in people far worse than those in nature. And I'm afraid, these plagues are destroying our town" [7] (p. 173). The real problems facing the community are not mythical but human in nature.

The primordial sin had actually been committed long before Goodbird's murder: It occurred at the very moment of arrival of the group in the new territory, namely the claiming of the land and the ensuing exploitation of nature—rather than living with it. In this sense, the Christian religion is on the side of the land-claiming, which indeed has a central position in the Old Testament, to which the first act of the play is explicitly compared by the metatext, Act One being titled "THE OLD TESTAMENT OR WHY THE WELL RAN DRY" [7] (p. 143). The Christian religion is also complicit with the alienation of nature that follows from the claiming of the land.

In the second act, which takes place sixteen years after the first one, Number Two takes this exploitation of nature one step further by turning nature into financial profit, becoming rich in the process. In this, the town continues to follow in the footsteps of the U.S.-American society in its development into a capitalist class society. After the Seminole landowner Trowbridge's death, Number Two becomes wealthy selling corn. Although in the second act the land is no longer owned by one single person, Number Two's new wealth allows him to become dominant in the community,



which is symbolically reinforced by Number Two taking over the position of sheriff, previously held by Trowbridge.

Revealingly, the term Pharaoh is applied not only to Trowbridge but also to the town elder Horse Power. The symbolism of Egypt and the Pharaoh, thus, refers not to any character in particular, but to “domination” per se, i.e., on the one hand, one person ruling over others, but also, on the other hand, the beliefs and narratives that hold the community in their spell and make them willing subjects of domination.

All these multiple tensions—the ones between Christian and pagan beliefs and customs competing for dominance over the community as well as the various frictions caused by inner-group discord and external conflicts with a constructed Other—lead to violent confrontations between the characters, during which some of them get killed and which, eventually, threaten to tear the whole community apart.

Only Horse Power’s final recognition saves it: He realizes that the well has run dry because the community has forgotten how to cry, thereby foreclosing the cleansing and purifying function of tears. By not crying for years, the community has failed to purify itself from its faults; it has failed to assume defeat and all the suffering and hardship that comes with it; it has failed to include loss in the narratives of its past, thereby negating an important part of its identity.

The implications bring us back to the outset of the play: In being expelled from their homeland, the Black Seminoles construct an alternative narrative, redefining hardship and injustice as opportunity. Original home is re-defined as imprisonment and oppression; the new grounds imposed on them are re-interpreted as a place onto which hopes of a new community are projected. But this creates a rift in the collective identity that cannot be reduced to questions of race or ethnicity. Horse Power’s realization that the dryness of the well is due to the fact that the community has not been able to cry during all those years is, of course, a conspicuous allusion to one of this community’s identity-forging events: Their removal from Florida to the Indian Territory, an event popularly known as the trail of tears. By refusing to cry (and by focusing on their liberation from the white mainstream U.S. society), they have renounced part of their hybrid identity. Only by re-integrating the African-American part of their identity, which justifies the re-interpretation of their removal as exodus, an escape from oppression to freedom, with the other component part, the American Indian, for which the experience was a traumatic one, can the community avoid its demise, which eventually happens when Wonderful, Trowbridge and Number Two’s grandson, accepts both parts of this identity and starts praying “to Jesus and the olden spirits” [7] (p. 217) simultaneously.

Finally, one needs to keep in mind that the play is not primarily aimed at Black Seminole spectators, quite to the contrary: Before the play was produced in Tampa, Florida (i.e., anywhere near an important Seminole—let alone Black Seminole—population), it was staged in Juneau, Minneapolis and Los Angeles [12], thereby addressing an ample spectrum of the U.S.-American society.

Seen from that point of view, the Black Seminole community of the play also represents a microcosm that reflects on the whole of the U.S.-American society at whom the play is directed. The parallels between the hybrid community and U.S. mainstream society have been pointed out in the analysis above. Thus, the play not only denounces the need for the Black Seminole community to integrate the loss and hardship they shared with other American Indian communities into its identity so as to be able to purify itself—by addressing this denunciation to a general U.S.-American audience, it also confronts the latter with its own difficulties in acknowledging (historically often self-produced) loss, an acknowledgement that it needs in order to recognize and integrate its web of Othernesses that is central to its own identity.

## 5. Conclusions

Marcus Gardley’s *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* succeeds in complicating Otherness, replacing a binary concept of it by a complex web of Othernesses. And this complication of Otherness is finally used to denounce the domination, in which the Black Seminole community, rather than setting up their

own, alternative model, follow the patterns of Western societies that they had initially moved away from. At the same time it argues for an integration of the component parts of a complex collective identity, insinuating catastrophic consequences when one part is idealized to the exclusion of another (or others), which is an important message at a time when a binary, exclusionary concept of ethnic identity is re-surging in certain parts of industrialized societies.

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